A. Panel Notes

semiotics as a discipline is in a state of flux -- change

Roland Barthes, a French critic begins his discussion of semiotics with language--then moves to signs

Roland Barthes--in his lecture In "INauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology--College de France, January 7, 1977" writes:

"Our modern innocence speaks of power as if it were a single thing: on one side those who have it, on the other those who do not...This object in which power is inscribed, for all human eternity, is language,or to be more precise, its necessary expression: the language we speak and write. Language is legislation, speech is its code." We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive...Jacobson has shown that a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say.

Barthes go on to discuss semiology in terms of signs:

"Semiology, which we can define as the science of signs, of all signs, has emerged from linguistics through its operational concepts...The semiologist,is in short an artist...He plays with signs as with a concsious decoy, whose fascination he savors and wants to make others savor and understand. The sign at least the sign he sees is always immediate, subject to the kind of evidence which leaps to the eyes, like a trigger of the imagination, which is why this semiology is not a hermenetics...Its objects are texts of the image-making process: narratives, images, portraits, expressions, idiolects, passions, structures which play simulataneously with an appearance of representation and with an uncertainty of truth. I should like to call "semiology" the course of operations during which it is possible-even called for-to play with the sign as with a painted veil, or again, with a fiction."

Barthes finishes his lecture with,"There is an age at which we teach what we know. Then comes another age at which we teach what we do not know; this is called research. Now perhaps comes the age of another experience: that of unlearning, of yielding to the unforseeable change which forgetting imposes on the semimenation of the knowleges, cultures and beliefs we have traversed."

A number of contemporary artists engage in their art practise in this way--as a research/process.

to name only a few --

Robert Filliou, a French performance artist

B.

Martha Rosler (from a discussion of her work in Fuse magazine:"mimics an ordinary cultural form or event, simulatneiously rearranging the content in a way which impels us to question the nature of this form. In a videotape, "Semiotics in the Kitchen," an alphabetic runthough of kitchen tools which mimics a home economics calss or a TV cooking program, the armament potential of these tools is revealed. The use of every implement Rosler picks up is demonstrated in a hostile aggressive fashion. Women's means of production has destructive potential."

Al Razutis, a Vancouver filmmaker and critic, uses semiotic analysis in both his film and critical writing. In an experimental film of his, "A Message From our Sponsor,"which has gained attention more because of the censorship cases arising from its showing at aCanadian Images Festival several years ago, studies the sign systems within advertising, giving an image analysis of the sexual innuendoes within television advertising. The film is not a documentary which explains. Rather, the film directly presents ad imagery from the television--gives color wipes and distortions of the image to make us as viewer re-see and thus re-think the ad, and finally, the film completes the sexual innuendoes of the ads (for which it was censored.)

Another Vancouver filmmakers, Patricia Gruben, works with a semiotic analysis to break down conventional narrative structures. In the film,"Central Character," she challenges our traditional notions of story, which use character, plot, setting and theme as structuring devices. In this film, Gruben makes all the story elements equal--adding confusion for an audience accustomed to having a story pre-digested for us. She forces us as viewers to construct the story.

The list of artists working within this area can go on and on--the artists I am thinking of have not used this field of semiotics as a formal academic discipline, but borrow freely from it--re-inventing...

A number of critics in the field of art are using semiotics as a theoretical framework. The current art lecture series in Toronto, called "Parole/Talking" uses one of Saussure's terms as the title for the lecture.

SEMIOTICS AND ART

-EMBODY A NUMBER OF SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT--DEVELOPING DIFFERENTLY IN Italy, France, the States, Russia and so on... thus there is no definitive answer to "what is semiotics/semiology/semiotique/ Rather, I will attempt to LOCATE/to PLACE/toGROPE for "what is semiotics? "
-key names--Pierce(American), Roland Barthes(French), Umberto Eco(Italian) Saussure(Swiss)

--key words--from Saussure--langue/parole--from Kroetsch (Open Letter):"These are these two sides to language: langue and Parole. Langue is the great given, the sum total of words and grammar and literature and concluded speech. Parole is what one of us say, the uniqueness of the speaking (writing) person. If you are unlucky, the great given(language) swamps you, and even when you speak, you are silent. If you are incredibly lucky, and if you work your ass of, the great given sounds not over, but in your unique speaking. If that happens, then you have found a voice."

In the film, TECHNOLOGICALLY NATIVE, Marie Cure-you-us, a scientist studying language by x-raying words tells us (in a lecture dissertation):"It was first diagnosed in speech,when increasingly, amounts of syntax separated themselves. They no longer connected the inner voice to the outer world of people. Language had developed a mutation, a cancerous growth, if you will, where references made were no longer meaningful to others."

Language has betrayed--the inner voice no longer connected to the outer world of people and language--In the film, both Marie and Pol Perception are tackling the difficulties inherent in language, and attempt to articulate through language these difficulties to themselves, to us(viewers--Pol confronts the viewer/Marie lectures the viewer) and to each other.

Don Mabie, in his review of TECHNOLOGICALLY NATIVE describes the last scene in the film:"Pol soon becomes worried about the direction in which Marie is proceeding, for by now she is more entrapped by words than he ever was. He feels they must confront the situation; they meet over coffee in an attempt to discuss what has happened and in their conversation they both discover that, even though they are both deeply involved with language, they can no longer communicate with each other: words have failed them. In an insert in this restauant scene, you see Marie acting as Pol's consultant--he, pacing in front of a highly mirrored desk--in a voiceover, you hear Marie:

"POL, look. When you came to me, I analyzed your world of language which had invaded you, had confused you, had failed you."

This failure of language--that language is a medium we enter--which may control us has been observed by linguists--Whorf and Sapir. Hawkes(in Semiotics and Structuralism) comments:"And indeed, when Sapir, and later the influential B.L. Whorf, made their initial extensions of linguistic structuring into other fields of social behavior, they quickly reached the conclsuion that the 'shape'of a culture, or total way of life of a community, was in fact determined by-or at any rate clearly 'structured' in the same way as-that culture's language...'We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation.'...The assumption fundamental to this conception is that the world of space and time is in fact a continuum without firm and irrevocable boundaries or division, which each language divides up and encodes in accordance with its own particular structure." (p.32-33)

Pol, in the first section of the film, can be seen in a room of the imagination--one wall, in a building from downtown Calgary (in slide) in partial construction. Pol works through a process of investigation of language to the conclusion, "Language speaks us." And why is it that we find ourselves lost in language (now looking into a mirror, facing himself and looking at us through the gaze in the mirror) when we've departed only in an attempt to get closer to it, to find meaning in the words, not between them." ~~Language is our worst enemy."~~

This attempt to make meaning directly, rather than through a process leads Pol Perception to declare:"Language is our worst enemy."

Roland Barthes, speaking on "The Structuralist Activity" say about this activity: "Subsequently, it highlights the strictly human process by which men(women) give meaning to things. Is this new? To a certain degree, yes; of course the world has never stopped looking for the meaning of what is given it and of what it produces; what is new is a mode of thought (or a "poetics") which seeks less to assign completed meanings to the objects it discovers than to know how meaning is possible, at what cost and by what means...The artist, the analyst recreates the course taken by meaning but does not name it..and it is because literature (and I add art)..(gives) an answer which questions and a question which answers." (The Structuralist ACtivity)

some more key words

One of the features of Saussure's study of language is the distinction between signifier/signified--the signifier being the sound/the image itself, and the the signified, the reference... the meaning... The artist takes the liberty of removing the signified...leaving the "meaning" open--not just to any interpretation, but to force the observer to give attention to his/her viewing process...

Kroetsch, in an essay in Open letter, writes,"It is hard to hear a new voice, as hard as it is to listen to an unknown language. ...Why do we resist hearing? Lawrence attempts an anser. "Out of fear,"he say. "The world fears a new experience more than it fears anything. Because a new experience desplaces so many old experiences...The world doesn't fear a new idea. it can pigeon hole any idea. But it can't pigeon-hole a real new experience. It can only dodge...Lawrence's principal criterion is: 'Art-speech is the only truth. An artist is usually a damned liar, but his art, if it be art, will tell you the truth of his day. And that is all that matters. Away with the eternal truth. Truth lives from day to day...' (P.39, 40)

In the film, TECHNOLOGICALLY NATIVE, MarieCure-you-us rejects the idea of an absolute "linguistic uttered" truth, saying, "If there is an absolute...it is non-language." and Pol, in his discourse with himself & us, as viewers, declares, "Truth is non-language."

The two figures in the film struggle with the activities of recording and inventing or documenting and fictionalizing or documenting and telling--the film itself uses the structure of a narrative document. It neither completely tells--fictionalizes--not completely documents--but exists somewhere in-between... We have used this binary of documentation/narration in a reflexive way: the film uses a number of different narrative techniques in an attempt to document all our ways of "telling".The figures in themselves move back & forth from recording/documenting to telling/fictionalizing/inventing. The film resists a realism in its charater/figure/persona/or, as Don Mabie so eloquently phrases it,"I should point out now that we are getting to know Pol and Marie, that they are not real people; they are not even characters in a film; they are agents/participants/actants(the personification) of Art and of Science;Pol is Art and Marie is Science." The sets in the film themselves are a mixture of the surreal --an x-ray room where Marie is examining the body of language, or Pol's blackened void--with objects of a room, but where pictures float on invisible walls and one wall becomes the city itself in construction or the restaurant, a real set, but with

a conversation taking place in an unreal talking languague--it is the language of discourse, spoken as if it were a conversation, a dialogue, a confrontation...

These have been, at times, reckless generalizations attempting to locate / to map the very general field of Semiotics and art.